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SUBJECT: FM LIVNI OPPOSES USG ASSISTANCE TO ABBAS

Classified By: A/DCM Norm Olsen for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni cautioned Senator Joseph Lieberman April 20 that by strengthening President Mahmud Abbas the USG could lend legitimacy to the Palestinian Authority (PA) without changing Hamas. Livni also said that the GOI does not plan to involve the Palestinians in the convergence plan, but hopes agreement between Israel and the U.S. will convince the international community to support it. Even while withdrawing from parts of the West Bank, Livni stressed, the GOI will need to retain control of "certain interests, such as water, holy places, and air space." If the Palestinians respond to the convergence plan by unilaterally declaring statehood, she said, then "this step will take the question of the refugees off the table." Livni also said that she anticipates that the new Israeli governing coalition will include some 84 MK's. At the end of the meeting, Livni made a point of adding that "the Russians are taking a problematic position not only toward Iran, but on other issues as well." END SUMMARY.

LIVNI: DO NOT STRENGTHEN ABBAS

¶2. (C) Senator Lieberman told FM Livni that advisors to President Abbas want to send PA presidential guard forces to the Israel-Gaza border to prevent the launching of Kassam rockets. Senator Lieberman asked Livni if she would oppose USG efforts to train or equip the PA presidential guard? "It sounds very tempting," Livni replied, "and it even looks like we have nothing to lose, but we do." Livni warned that this type of support could create "the most dangerous scenario," in which "we lend legitimacy to the PA through dealings with Abu Mazen," but Hamas does not change. "Abu Mazen cannot deliver," she said; by strengthening him, "we allow him to serve as a fig leaf for Hamas."

¶3. (C) Livni said that the GOI's preference is to negotiate with a partner. "Without a partner, though, we're fooling ourselves," she said. "Abu Mazen is a form of fooling ourselves." Livni acknowledged that while Abbas finally "seems determined," he is weaker now than he was before the elections. Livni called Abbas "an address, but not a partner," adding, "We can send humanitarian aid to an address, but we cannot negotiate with it." She said that Abbas has proven incapable of stopping terrorism, ending incitement, and curtailing the influence of Islamic extremism in education.

¶4. (C) Senator Lieberman said that former PA Chief Negotiator Saeb Erekat told him that he hopes the situation will deteriorate sufficiently to enable Abbas to dissolve the Palestinian Legislative Council and call new elections within several months, or at least by the end of the year. Livni said that Abbas and Erekat should discuss this plan with the Europeans as well.

LIVNI: WE WILL NOT INVOLVE PALESTINIANS IN "CONVERGENCE"

15. (C) Senator Lieberman asked Livni whether the GOI plans to introduce any sort of initiative to involve the Palestinians in the convergence plan (A/PM Olmert's policy of evacuating isolated West Bank settlements and making the separation barrier Israel's eastern border). Senator Lieberman noted that discussion of convergence with a credible Palestinian partner might lead to final status talks. Livni said that Israeli leaders lack a partner with whom they could develop an initiative. "We only want to talk about a final status agreement if it is possible to achieve one," she added. Livni stressed that unilateralism is not an Israeli choice or ideology. "Israeli politicians know that without a partner, we must take our future into our own hands. We have to take care of our own security interests."

LIVNI: GOI SEEKS USG HELP IN DETERMINING INTERESTS IN WB

16. (C) Senator Lieberman said that there is bi-partisan support in the U.S. Congress for Israel. Livni said that the U.S. and Israel must now reach an understanding about their respective interests in the convergence plan, and then convince the international community to support the new border. "Our next steps are not truly unilateral," Livni said. "They are to be taken with the U.S. and, we hope, also with the Europeans." The GOI will need to retain control of "certain interests, such as water, holy places, and air space," she said. Livni emphasized that the GOI seeks to consult with the USG about these issues. She said that the USG is "essential in building international understanding" as to why "Israel wants to withdraw, but must hold on to some interests."

LIVNI: PALESTINIAN STATEHOOD RESOLVES THE REFUGEE ISSUE

17. (C) Livni said she anticipates that in response to Israel's establishment of defensible borders, the Palestinians will unilaterally declare statehood. In her view, such a declaration would resolve the issue of Palestinian refugees. Livni referred to President Bush's letter of assurance of April 14, 2004, which she said supports this view. She noted that the President's letter also stated that it is unrealistic to expect that the outcome of final status talks will lead to a return to previous borders. "Before these two statements," she said, "I did not support disengagement." Livni said that she hopes the UN will ensure that any new Palestinian state is not a terrorist state, and that it will "take Resolution 194 off the books."

LIVNI: WE WANT A LARGE GOVERNING COALITION

18. (C) Livni said she anticipates that the new Israeli governing coalition will be broad and include some 84 MKs out of the Knesset's total of 120. "We want a coalition large enough that no single party can threaten it," she said. Livni said that the coalition will probably include Kadima (29 MK's), Labor (19), Shas (12), Yisrael Beiteinu (11), Gil Pensioners (7), and United Torah Judaism (6). Meretz (5) was invited as well, she said, but will not join a government that includes Yisrael Beiteinu Chairman Avigdor Lieberman. (Note: Since this meeting, A/PM Olmert completed coalition agreements with the Labor, Pensioners, and Shas parties, is poised to form a coalition of 67 MKs, and is planning on introducing his new government on May 4 for Knesset approval. End note.)

LIVNI: RUSSIA IS BECOMING "PROBLEMATIC"

19. (C) Livni made a point of adding at the end of the meeting that "the Russians are taking a problematic position not only toward Iran, but on other issues as well."

¶10. (U) Senator Lieberman cleared this cable on May 2.

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JONES